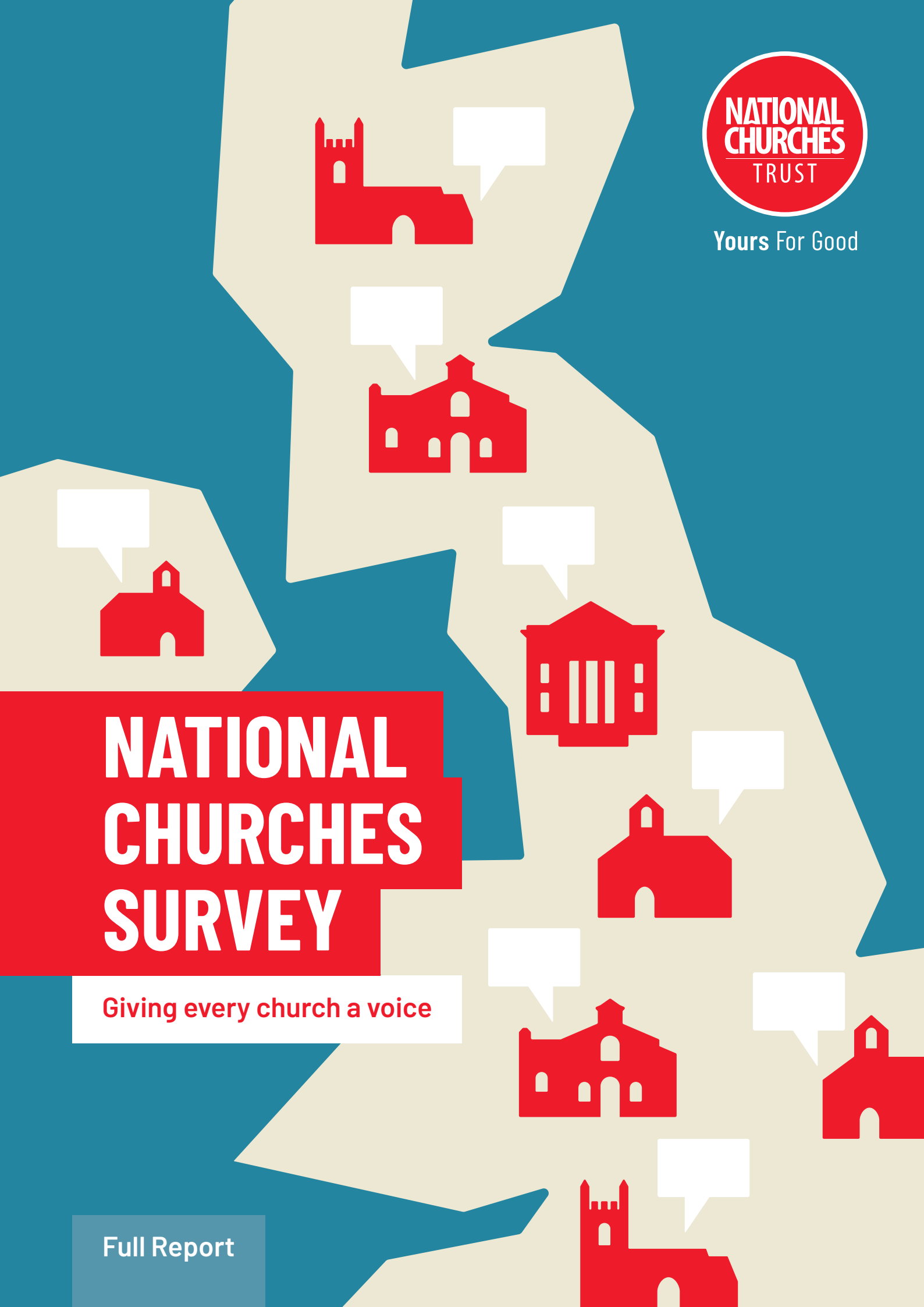


NATIONAL CHURCHES TRUST

Yours For Good

NATIONAL CHURCHES SURVEY

Giving every church a voice

Full Report

About National Churches Trust

An independent charity working on the ground in all four nations and supporting churches of all denominations so that church buildings across the UK are well maintained, open to everyone, sustainable and valued.

About Whitestone

A research consultancy with a particular specialism in faith issues and audiences, seeking to support clients with insight that supports public policy, reputation management and communications.

We gratefully acknowledge the kind and generous support of Yeomans, Ecclesiastical Insurance, and the University of York that enabled the National Churches Survey to take place.

Chair's foreword

Now is the moment to act

Our churches stand as extraordinary witnesses to history: places where beauty, belonging and service to the community have flourished for centuries. At a time when the world around us is marked by turbulence such as economic challenges, social change, and environmental uncertainties, these buildings remain a light in the darkness, resilient centres of worship, heritage and social care.

This report shows both the scale of what is at stake and the hope that continues to shine through. Churches are not passive relics of the past; they are active, living places, powered by volunteers and sustained by communities who depend on them. They embody resilience in its truest form – adapting to changing needs, welcoming vulnerable people, and safeguarding treasures for future generations. What emerges here is not only a portrait of struggle but also one of remarkable strength and a reminder that these places deserve our continued commitment.

The National Churches Survey sets out clearly the challenges that churches are facing and also the opportunities for renewal, if we act together.

Without intervention the risks are high – we risk losing these buildings and all they embody – for good. Let us rise to that call, so that churches, chapels and meeting houses continue to stand as beacons of hope in the United Kingdom now and for many generations to come.

Sir Philip Rutnam
Chair, National Churches Trust

Contents

3 Executive summary
4 Key findings
6 Methodology

Detailed findings

9 **1. At the heart of community: why we need churches**
1.1 Frontline of social care
1.2 Open doors and shared spaces
1.3 The volunteer lifeline
1.4 Custodians of cultural treasures

20 **2. Endurance and renewal: the challenge of caring for church buildings**
2.1 Maintenance – battling the elements
2.2 Facilities – fit for today's communities
2.2A Everyday essentials
2.2B Opening Doors: Accessibility as hospitality
2.3 Costs associated – investing together for the future

38 **3. Protected for today – sustainable for tomorrow**
3.1 Church buildings and the challenge of climate change

42 **4. What holds churches back – and what helps them to thrive**
4.1 Barriers to growth and resilience
4.2 Recipes for success
4.3 Web of church resilience

51 **5. Conclusion: a call to action**

52 **6. Acknowledgements**

54 **About the National Churches Trust**

Executive Summary

Giving every church a voice

The National Churches Survey is a comprehensive study which explores buildings across nations and denominations, from medieval churches and Nonconformist chapels to Catholic parishes and vibrant Pentecostal spaces. Similar in size and scope to our 2010 Survey, it shows that churches are not only spiritual homes, but vital partners in social care, wellbeing, and cultural life. They are places of sacred sociability – where foodbanks, youth groups, choirs, warm spaces, counselling, and community events flourish side by side.

They also hold extraordinary treasures such as stained glass, woodwork, memorials and records, connecting generations and anchoring local identity. Often the oldest, most recognisable building in any village, town or city, churches could be considered the single most widespread community and heritage asset in the United Kingdom.

The Survey also shows how churches are deeply invested in managing their buildings – adapting layouts, becoming more sustainable, adding toilets, installing heating, and creating new digital and accessible spaces, often funded and delivered by volunteers to meet local demand. Caring for churches is not simply about maintenance; it is a form of stewardship which honours the past, sustains the present and secures resilience for the generations to come.

Yet only two–thirds believe their church will 'definitely' be open in five years' time. Confidence is far weaker in rural areas where just over half share this certainty. We hear that volunteer time is stretched, finances remain a barrier, and maintenance issues are becoming costly crises. The strain on volunteers, congregations and clergy, who shoulder the burden of fundraising, governance, bid writing, and day-to-day upkeep, cannot be underestimated.

So, far from being peripheral, church buildings remain at the very heart of local life. But for how much longer? Without urgent action, we risk losing buildings, heritage, and community support that cannot be replaced.

This report explores what is at stake, setting out the benefits churches bring to community and heritage, the threats they face, and the urgency of support required. Churches are doing all they can but, without coordinated investment and partnership, this vast resource is in danger of disintegrating before our eyes.

The National Churches Survey also contains within it a message of hope. Thousands of churches have come together to tell us about their extraordinary commitment, but also their fears for the future. We have seen that where government and funders have stepped in, the results have been transformative. If we rise to the challenge, churches can continue to stand at the heart of communities as beacons of belonging, resilience, and social care. If we fail, we risk losing not only bricks and mortar but the immeasurable value that churches contribute every day.

Key findings

Historic yet active

64% of churches surveyed are pre-20th century buildings, with 90% purpose–built for worship, and 8 in 10 are holding services at least once a week, if not more. They remain true to their original purpose while adapting to modern needs.

Vital community hubs

Over half of all churches are used by other organisations at least once per week, confirming their role as civic hubs. 56% of churches distribute food, and 85% would expand community support if they had more resources.

Accessibility and openness

58% of churches are open to the public beyond services, and 42% are open daily. This level of accessibility is consistent across urban and rural contexts.

A helping hand

Churches are clear on what resources they need to do more and meet the demands of their local community. 70% say they need more volunteers, 62% say financial support and 39% say better facilities.

Confidence about the future

1 in 20 churches say they feel they will ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ not be used as a place of worship in just 5 years’ time, almost two–thirds (64%) ‘definitely will’ and 27% ‘probably’ so.

Local finances stretched

Congregations and local people remain the bedrock of philanthropic support for churches. 77% of churches rely on local giving and 54% on local fundraising. More than half of churches (65%) have covered 76–100% of repair costs from their own funds in the last 5 years.

Volunteer lifeline

83% of churches say an active body of volunteers is central to successful management of their church buildings. A lack of volunteer time also prevents churches from doing more in their community, with this factor rising sharply from 33% in 2010 to 45% in 2025.

Modern facilities

Churches have made huge strides since our 2010 Survey, with 82% now offering fully accessible entrances (63% in 2010), 73% providing accessible toilets, and 87% connected to mains water (66% in 2010). Also 58% are now equipped with Wifi.

Challenges with building conditions

Roof repairs, guttering/drains, and heating are the most urgent needs facing the UK’s church buildings, with 1 in 10 churches identifying these as needing urgent repair in the next 12 months. Those churches with a roof in good condition have decreased from 70% in 2010 to 61% in 2025.

Methodology

The survey questionnaire

The questionnaire was structured in five key sections:

1. **Categorisation** – questions to gain basic information about the building, its location and how frequently it is used
2. **About Your Church Building** – questions to understand the current condition, assets and facilities of the main church building and associated properties
3. **Supporting Your Local Community** – questions to assess the value of the building to the wider community and the activities and resources involved in those community interactions
4. **Managing and Resourcing your Church** – questions to understand how the building is managed
5. **Your Church's Finances** – questions to evaluate the financial health of churches as well as assessing environmental measures and future church viability.

Pilot and main stage

The National Churches Trust undertook a similar large survey in 2010. The results were informative and have continued to support our work. We took care when developing the National Churches Survey to make sure that the results were comparable, as far as possible with the 2010 survey. The Steering Group met in January 2025 to discuss the aims, practicalities and content of the study. The questionnaire was drafted during Q1 2025 and the Pilot Stage conducted during April. During this process 36 Surveys were completed independently of Steering Group members, extensive feedback was obtained and metrics such as time spent completing the Survey monitored. At the end of this process and on the basis of feedback received, the questionnaire was edited ahead of its launch on 9 May 2025. The questionnaire was also translated into Welsh. The Survey was formally closed in mid-July 2025, but late completions were accepted until the end of that month.

There are an estimated

38,500

churches, chapels, and meeting houses in the UK, approximately half of which are listed buildings.

Contacts and response

In order to maximise participation rates, and to supply as much information to respondents as possible before completion, churches were invited to participate via a bespoke web page hosted by National Churches Trust, from which respondents could access the Survey.

Additional measures to encourage participation included:

- working with denominations, heritage networks and church networks to encourage representation from across the wider UK church community by disseminating the link on our behalf;
- creating a pre-registration page where churches could indicate their willingness to participate and from which they could be invited to take part once the Survey went live;
- the generous support of Yeomans and Ecclesiastical Insurance who publicised the survey;
- mainstream media coverage and social media campaigns for the Survey.

A series of reminder emails were sent to those we had either contacted directly, or who had registered themselves but not completed the Survey. A follow-up letter was sent to those who did not initially respond.

A total of 3,628 churches took part in the Survey, with responses received broadly representative of the UK in terms of denomination, attendance and building age and location, based on relevant independent data. There are no current UK-wide figures for community use so we have, in the process of analysis, utilised such independent data as are available to make estimates for the wider UK picture.

Weighting

Data were weighted by denomination, UK nation, rurality, and listed status. We calculated target weights for denomination using data kindly provided by Dr Peter Brierley. We then weighted by listed status and UK nations with data from the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance, and by rurality using a combination of data specific to the Church of England (from their statistics team) as well as other available data sources on the rurality of churches. Once weighted, we compared the data of congregation size against the most up to date data from the major denominations on their registered congregation sizes which were all within a narrow range.

DETAILED FINDINGS

1 At the heart of community: why we need churches

Churches are among the most accessible community buildings in the UK and their presence fosters a sense of belonging and continuity that few other local spaces can match. What makes churches distinctive is the way in which their spiritual, social, and cultural purposes come together.

They remain, first and foremost, places of worship. In 2025, 80% of churches hold services at least weekly, confirming their ongoing role as spiritual centres at the heart of local life. They are sustained by volunteers who pour time and energy into keeping doors open, they provide spaces where the most vulnerable are welcomed and supported, and they house treasures that connect us to the past.

But their story does not stop at the altar: 58% are open beyond services, and 42% are open daily, offering a welcome that is rare among historic buildings. In rural areas especially, they are often the only space consistently open to and offered to all. This centre of community life is as relevant today as at any point in our history, with many churches extending their mission to include foodbanks, engagement programmes, concerts, art exhibitions and more.

Photo: Adam Glennon

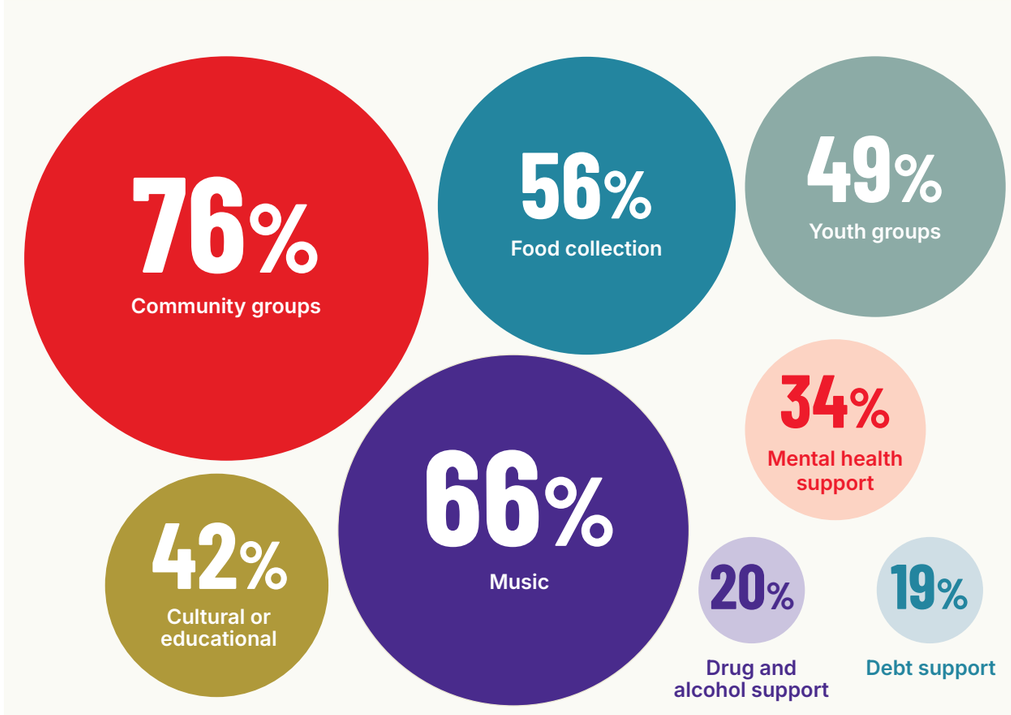
1.1 Frontline of Social Care

Beyond worship and social gatherings, churches directly address some of the most pressing crises facing society today. The National Churches Survey shows that 56% of churches are directly involved in food distribution, with just under four in ten (37%) offering this support at least weekly. This reflects wider national trends: The Trussell Trust reported that 2.9 million emergency food parcels were distributed in the UK in 2024/2025.[1] Many of these parcels were distributed through church-based hubs, underscoring that churches are not simply venues but the home base where frontline partners are tackling hunger.

Alongside food insecurity, churches are responding to other urgent needs. The Survey shows that 34% provide support for people struggling with anxiety, depression or isolation, and 20% run or host activities for those affected by drug or alcohol addiction. A further 19% of churches offer debt advice or support from their buildings, filling critical gaps where statutory provision is lacking or overstretched. These activities are often modest, yet their significance and impact flows precisely from being rooted in local communities – they are trusted, and accessible.

This evidence underlines a powerful truth: churches are acting as the UK's 'hidden welfare network', offering support where other systems are strained. The nature of church outreach has evolved as churches have become frontline partners in health and social care.

Activities hosted



[1] The Trussell Trust, *End of Year Food Bank Statistics 2024/25* https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/latest-stats/end-of-year-stats

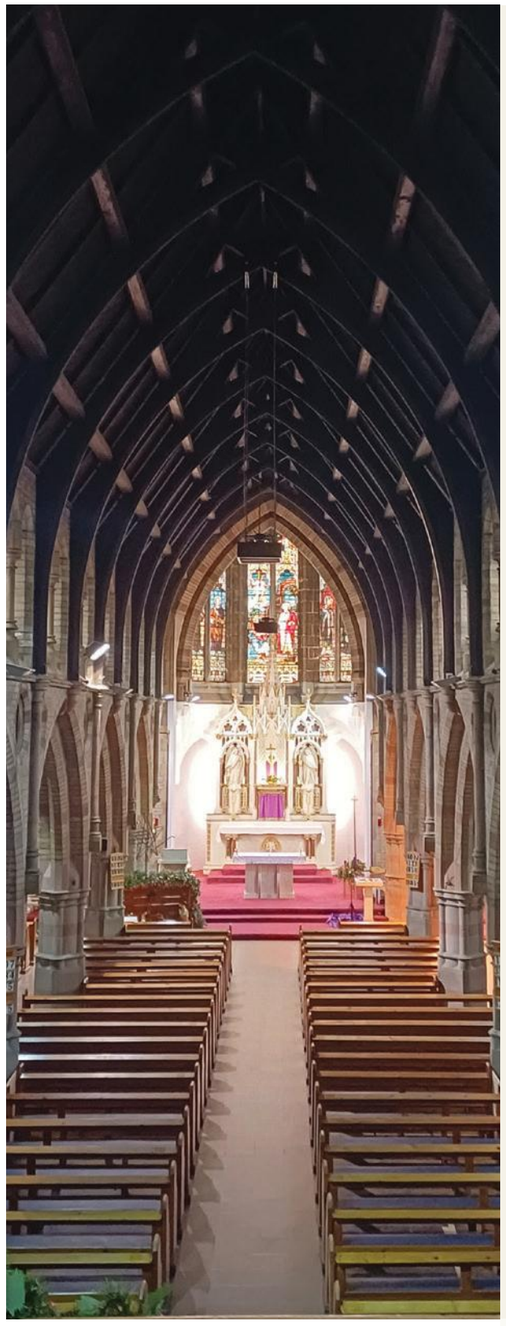


Photo: Karen Hind

Food and friendship

Every Saturday at St Mary the Immaculate Conception in Lochee, Dundee, volunteers turn the church hall into a community café.

The urban church is located in one of the most deprived areas of Dundee and for many the services it offers are a lifeline.

But the church itself is in poor condition. It is undergoing a multi–phase repair project, as the mid-19th century building needs a litany of repairs. When there's heavy rainfall, water seeps into the building. The restoration is tackling everything from the roof, walls and buttresses, as well as creating disabled access.

One of the reasons why the church is undergoing so many repairs and updates is to secure the building for the future so it can continue to host and run support from the church for the most vulnerable in the community.

"We have no doubt that this restoration will have a significant impact on the wellbeing of many people. St Mary's supports people that many others seek to exclude, not only Catholics but also people from other faiths and indeed no faith at all. People who are considered to be the most vulnerable and socially disadvantaged," shares Gerard Fitzpatrick, a member of the Parish Restoration Team at St Mary's Church.

St Mary the Immaculate Conception
Lochee, Dundee

1.2 Open Doors and Shared Spaces

Churches are also cultural and social centres – 66% host music groups, nearly half on at least a weekly basis (43%), inspiring creativity and confidence while bringing people together across generations. Just over three quarters (76%) host community gatherings such as coffee mornings or toddler groups which weave networks of belonging that are especially important in rural or deprived areas where other meeting spaces are scarce.

Churches rarely operate in isolation and in the Survey 53% report their building being used at least once per week by outside organisations, while 21% serve as a regular base for community or charitable groups. This shows that churches impact wider social settings, amplifying connections through partnerships with charities, local authorities, and voluntary organisations.

The Survey finds that 49% of churches host youth groups, with a third meeting at least weekly. In many areas, these represent some of the only structured and safe opportunities available to young people, filling the gaps left by the closure of other youth clubs and community centres in recent years. According to the charity Mind and its 2024 Big Mental Health Report[2], in England alone 1 in 5 children and young people are now living with a mental health difficulty, an increase from 1 in 9 in 2017. In this context, church–based youth groups are more than social gatherings – they are grounding opportunities for friendships, belonging and wellbeing.

Beyond the immediate benefit, hosting youth groups in heritage settings represents an investment: when children sing in choirs beneath stained glass, or gather in medieval naves for youth nights, they are not just taking part in activities but bonding with local history. These experiences could help ensure that the next generation values, cares for, and champions their church buildings as vital community assets.

[2] Mind, *The Big Mental Health Report 2024* https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/the-big-mental-health-report-2024

Photo: Ruth Towell

What St James the Great Means to Me

By David Cox, a member of the Square Peg Club, run by South Lincolnshire Dementia Support. St James the Great in Aslackby is one of the venues the group meets in. The rural church created an audio trail, funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, which was researched and voiced by local people with Early Onset Dementia.

This wonderful church serves the wider and local community and can best be described as entirely inclusive for all who use it, whether attending Parish Services or by taking part in the many varied secular all–age activities and events enjoyed by so many.

Chris and Denise [church wardens at St James the Great], supported by many other community members, put their hearts and souls into preparing for all the planned events and they totally deliver in every aspect, above and beyond. [We] have been lucky to have been so warmly welcomed and openly embraced by this church for many years now.

Square Peg Club members, all living with Dementia, have spent several happy and memorable activity days here. These past two years, we have been immersed in exploring, discovering and documenting by word and audio the amazing history of this wonderful building.

We have felt excited and motivated to have been involved and to have contributed to the significant amount of work required to meet the required project outcomes.

The result is quite clearly apparent, an example of just what can be achieved given the motivation, will and encouragement to succeed.

Speaking on behalf of my Square Peg Club friends, yes, we have a diagnosis of young/early onset Dementia – a hammer blow to receive and process.

We are all at varying stages of our journey, but I strongly state we are just the same people as at the point of receiving a diagnosis – of course life necessarily adjusts, but we remain living, feeling individuals. Quite simply, we merely wish to be treated with respect and not categorised or marginalised in any way. Sadly, many professional organisations can adopt such an attitude.

By contrast – and returning to this wonderful church and community – St James was awarded ‘Dementia Friendly Status’ and justifiably so. Whereas some organisations openly display their ‘Dementia Awareness’ accreditation but fail to follow through – they could learn much from this church’s attitude and fine example.

St James the Great
Aslackby, Lincolnshire

Photo: Ruth Towell

1.3 The volunteer lifeline

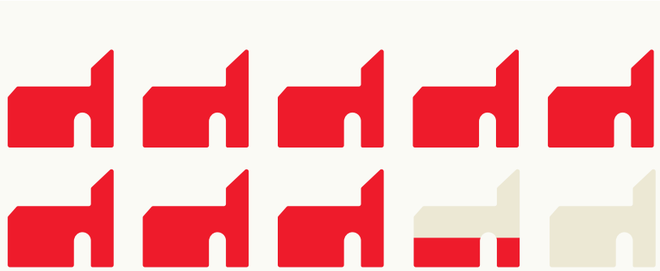
Volunteers are the hidden engine of church life, and without them so many aspects would grind to a halt. They are often how doors are unlocked, choirs can sing, food is distributed and young people find safe spaces to belong, along with supporting the clergy in immeasurable other ways. The contribution of this unseen workforce is immense: without them, the thousands of social services and community groups that meet in churches each week would simply not continue.

The scale of this commitment is staggering. In 2025, an overwhelming 83% of churches said the successful management of their buildings depends on an active body of volunteers. The average congregation now relies on 265 hours of unpaid service every month.

In 2010, only 33% of churches said that “lack of volunteer time” limited their ability to provide more community activities. By 2025, almost half (45%) identified this as a major barrier to doing more in the local community. In another question, when asked what practical assistance would help them expand, 70% pointed to “more volunteers” as the single most helpful support. Though the wording and framing have shifted from limitation to barrier, the trend over time is unmistakable: what was once a background worry has become one of the greatest obstacles to growth.

There also is an opportunity here to inspire and equip a new generation to step forward. The young people who are singing in choirs, joining local youth groups or discovering the heritage of their churches today could grow into tomorrow’s volunteers.

Strengthening the volunteer base of churches is one of the most effective investments that can be made to ensure these vital spaces remain alive, used as places of worship, and loved for decades to come.



83%

of churches said the successful management of their buildings depends on an active body of volunteers.

Volunteers under pressure

St Laurence, the oldest building in Chorley with over 800 years of history, is more than a Grade I listed church: it is the beating heart of the community. Its Norman font and ancient family pews testify to centuries of faith, but today it is the 160 volunteers who sustain its daily life.

160 may seem like a lot of volunteers. But even with one of the largest volunteer bases in this Survey, St Laurence struggles to meet local demand. Volunteers are already committed to a multitude of offerings throughout the week, such as cancer cafés, mental health and bereavement support, arts and crafts, history groups and money management. They also staff ‘Open Table’, a 24/7 ‘food hotline’ with referrals from the Council to deliver emergency parcels in the area.

Half of their volunteers are not church members; they are local people wanting to support this vital resource in the community.

This service is under extraordinary strain. Volunteers serve free hot meals most days, even though the lack of facilities means it is limited to soup and hot drinks. A vision to expand with a proper kitchen is currently on hold as the church also battles urgent roof failures that last year forced temporary closure when water poured onto the pews. The introduction of a £25,000 cap on the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme has left them unable to make urgent repairs and they are now unsure of how to proceed with updating the facilities in their building to meet local need.

While St Laurence’s dream of offering heritage tours and interpretation to showcase the building’s extraordinary story, they lack resource and funding. Grant applications, especially to The National Lottery Heritage Fund, take time and expertise. And all the volunteers are currently tied up providing the much–needed community support.

What this case shows is that numbers alone do not equal capacity; it is the intensity of the need, the fragility of the building, and the limits of volunteer hours that shape what can be achieved. Without more external support, both the building and the extraordinary volunteer commitment it inspires are at severe risk of exhaustion.

St Laurence
Chorley, Lancashire

Photo: National Churches Trust

1.4 Custodians of Cultural Treasures

There are over 20,000 listed places of worship in the UK, the vast majority of which are churches. Just over a fifth are Grade I listed, or equivalent, a third are Grade II* listed, and 40% are Grade II listed, according to data from the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance.[3]

The 2025 National Churches Survey also asked churches about their artefacts, from fonts and memorials to local and national social heritage stories. What was revealed shows churches as living 'memory banks', places where generations have marked life's key moments. Fonts are used to baptise children from local families; bells ring out for weddings; war memorials and plaques remember those lost in conflict. These treasures aren't static relics, they are enlivened by worship, restored by volunteers, cherished by families, and discovered by visitors, connecting the spiritual and cultural threads of society.

The Survey shows that **stained glass** stands out, appearing in 49% of churches as a work of artistic merit, and in 28% as a piece of national or local significance. These windows are visual wonders, telling biblical stories, commemorating local families, clergy, and benefactors, and reflecting creation. **Fonts** are the site of countless generations of baptisms and were highlighted by 27% of churches for their artistic quality, and by 22% for their local or national significance.

[3] Historic Religious Buildings Alliance (2025), *Number of listed places of worship* https://www.hrballiance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2025-01-31-number-of-listed-places-of-worship-in-UK.pdf

Photo: Nina McNeary / National Churches Trust

Passing art onto the next generation

St Macartan's (Forth Chapel) just outside Augher in County Tyrone has turned itself into a tourist destination. People come from all over the world, as far away as New Zealand, to see the heritage inside this small rural church. And it all began from the church commissioning an architectural survey and making the necessary repairs – made possible by local fundraising and grant applications – to their mid-19th century building to protect the stained glass windows.

The church is home to four stunning Clarke Studio windows. Following their restoration, the church now works with local tourism bodies to promote tours around St Macartan's. They also continue to work with nearby schools to share the local heritage and history. They even ran a stained glass art competition with a local school and held an exhibition of the artwork for the children and their families to attend.

St Macartan (The Forth) Chapel
Augher, County Tyrone

Canon McGahan, Parish Priest at St Macartan's, shares why this is so important:

"It was a tremendous opportunity in relation to the whole Harry Clarke stained glass windows, creating an awareness of the history attached to those windows, the history attached to the local church and the history attached to the local community.

"And when we reflected on the church, when we think that the people in the past gave us a tremendous legacy – they worked so hard to give us a building, a church which is so much part of the community.

"And bringing the present into the future – this was the vision, this was the hope, and this is what we continue to do.

"That is why we involved so many young people from our local primary schools in the art exhibition competition... we want these windows to be in good condition to pass them on, not only to the present generation but the generations to come."

One in five churches (20%) reported having **memorials** of artistic merit, while more than a third (35%) identified them as historically significant. These monuments often bear the names of local men and women lost in wars while others commemorate community figures, benefactors, or generations of families, telling quieter but equally important stories of local continuity, reminding us that churches safeguard not only the memory of conflict, but also the lived experience of everyday community life.

The Survey shows that 15% of churches in Wales offer bilingual worship and an additional 12% use Welsh as the primary language. Places of Worship in Wales are not only guardians of stone and stained glass but also of language and identity, where services embody a cultural treasure unique to the United Kingdom.

Going, going, gone. What's at stake for the future of Welsh heritage

In Wales, when the official language of education and the workplace became English, it was the Welsh 'capel' (chapel) that allowed much of the Welsh population to still meet and live part of their lives in Welsh. It is the capel that has ensured the survival of the Welsh language to this day.

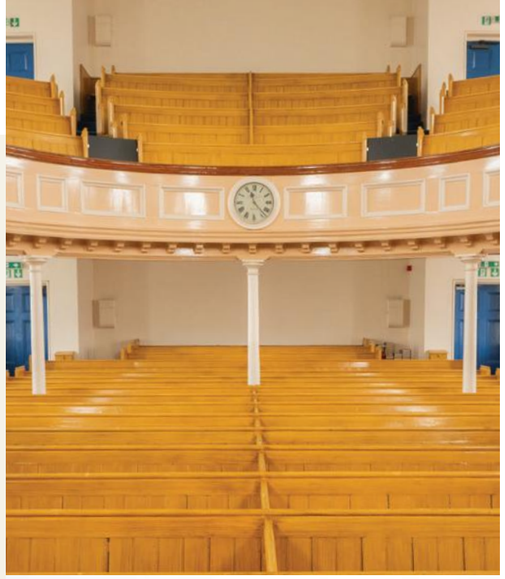
Chapels are a defining feature of the Welsh landscape. But for how much longer? As chapels are converted, sold, or demolished, much of Wales's cultural memory is in danger of being forgotten.

The heart of Welsh life

By Huw Powell–Davies, from Capel Bethesda in Mold, Flintshire

Capel Bethesda has a prominent place in the story of promoting the Welsh language here on the border and throughout Wales.

The church benefited from the contribution of writers, hymn writers, theologians and journalists who worked through the medium of Welsh from the beginning – people like Thomas Jones, Denbigh, Jane Owen, Roger Edwards and Daniel Owen who received encouragement at Bethesda and material for stories and novels in the characters and life of the chapel.



Welsh was the language of the Sunday school from the start, in 1806. Later in the middle of the 20th Century, a Welsh class was established here which eventually developed into two Welsh schools in the town.

The chapel has been at the heart of the Welsh life throughout the years, interweaving faith and culture and it continues to play its part in that work.

Capel Bethesda
Mold, Flintshire

Photos: Ioan Said

Other features highlight craft creativity – carvings (15% artistic; 13% of significance) and statues (13% artistic; 12% of significance), which range from medieval woodwork to Victorian sculpture. 12% of churches describe their "memory banks" of oral histories, photographs, and community records as artistically meaningful, and 22% see them as historically significant.

These cultural treasures are not static exhibits but continue to be part of peoples' lived experiences – sung beneath, prayed before, passed by each week. Their loss would be a cultural catastrophe, but their preservation is a gift to future generations.

Securing Belfast's maritime history

Sinclair Seamen's Presbyterian Church is one of Northern Ireland's most distinctive treasures, telling Belfast's maritime story through every detail of its building. The pulpit is carved with a ship's prow, bells and anchors hang from the walls, and worship begins each Sunday with a bell from HMS Hood. At the front stands a brass ship's wheel salvaged in 1924, while an anchor painted on the floor marks the spot where couples have made their vows through the centuries.

This extraordinary heritage was at real risk. The sandstone building had deteriorated so badly it was placed on Northern Ireland's Heritage at Risk Register. In 2024, a £50,000 National Churches Trust grant, together with a £10,000 Wolfson Fabric Repair Grant, enabled urgent stonework repairs to secure its future.

Sinclair Seamen's continues to weave history into living community life. It opens weekly to visitors and volunteers', welcomes people from around the world who want to trace their family's roots, and also runs children's sessions, teaching knot–tying and local history. In a docklands area now undergoing regeneration, with a new university nearby, the church is once again drawing in students and young people. Its story shows how investment in heritage sustains not just buildings, but the cultural identity and local life they inspire.

Sinclair Seamen's Presbyterian Church
Belfast, County Antrim

Photos: Laura McIlveen

2 Endurance and renewal: The challenge of church care

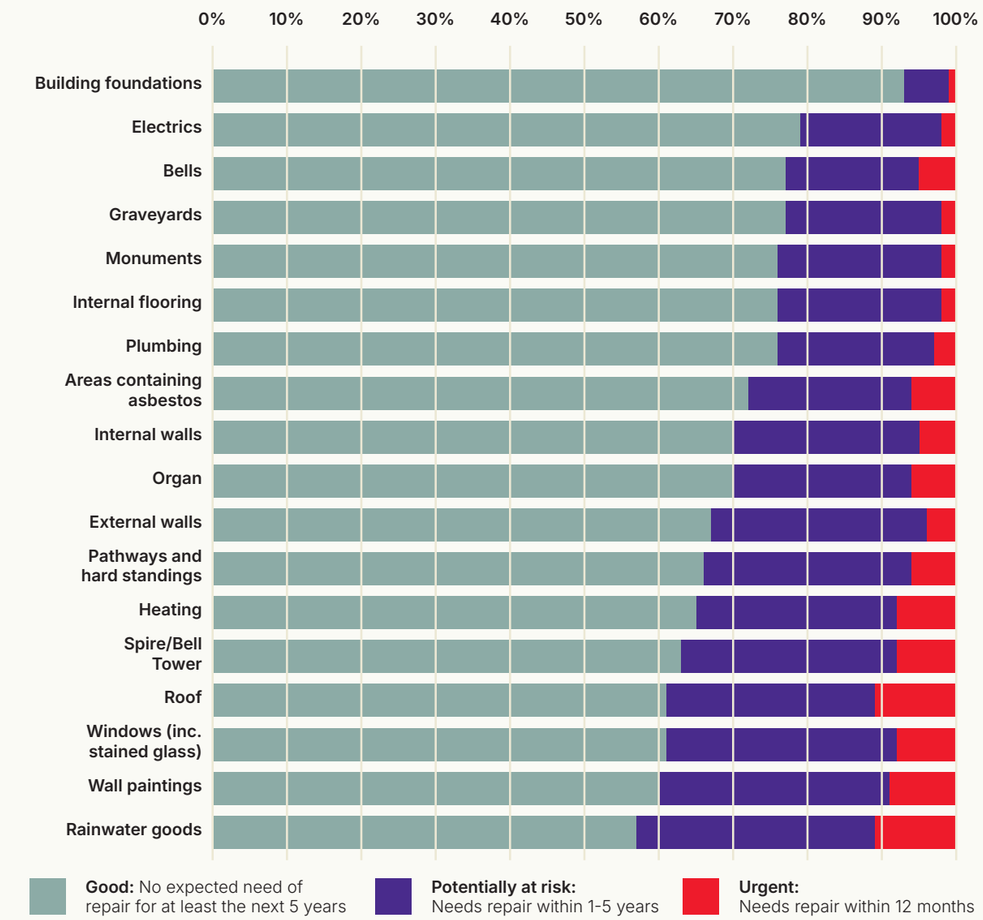
Church buildings are resilient, but they are not indestructible. The basics – stone, slate, lead, timber, glass – require regular care and without timely intervention can quickly deteriorate. Routine maintenance for even a modest parish church can run to thousands of pounds a year. Major works, such as replacing a roof or repairing a tower, can easily cost hundreds of thousands of pounds.

These are not isolated cases but part of a wider trend where small issues can become bigger crises if not handled with the proper support. However, the National Churches Survey also shows the extraordinary resourcefulness of churches. Many are raising funds locally, maintaining buildings as best they can, and adapting them to continue to be relevant and welcoming.

Photos: Steve Drysdale, Giant Web Design

What makes the difference is strategic, consistent, long-term support as well as targeted investment where it is needed most. This can not only save buildings from closure, but also enable them to adapt for modern use. Churches need to know what funds they can rely on in their planning, rather than putting together emergency bids. The question is not whether churches are willing to care for their buildings – they clearly are – but how to access financial support that can directly help. To achieve this, they need funding that's easy to reach, enough to cover the real level of demand, and sustained over time.

Current condition of church building and surrounding areas



2.1 Maintenance: battling the elements

Roofs: the first line of defence

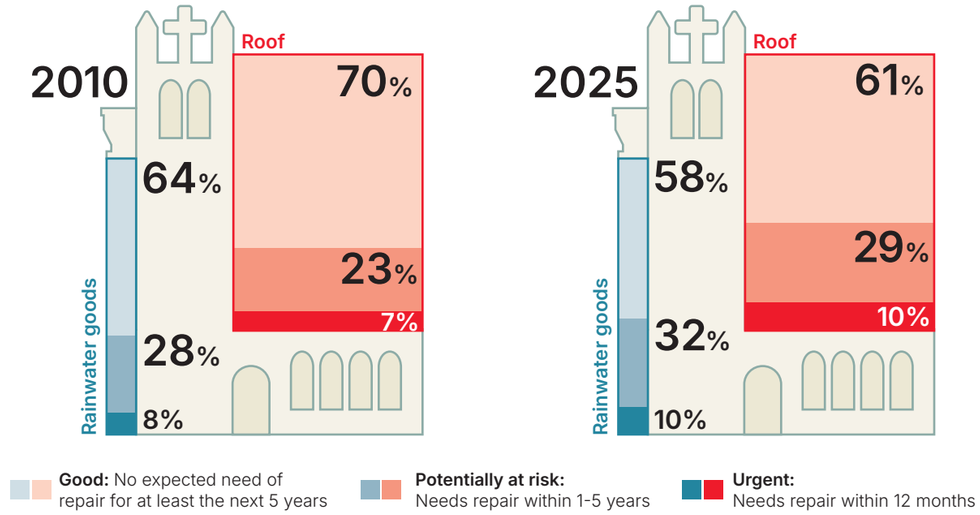
The 2025 National Churches Survey paints a stark picture: church roofs are under mounting strain. Roofs carry a particular weight in heritage terms, with these structures often requiring highly skilled repairs. Where these fail, damage spreads rapidly, as damp leads to more deterioration and weakened stonework, and puts the whole building at risk.

The Survey shows that although 61% are reported to be in good condition, this is down significantly since 2010 (70%). Moreover, 39% now say their roof is at risk or in urgent need of repair, compared with just 30% in 2010. A leaking roof is not only a practical crisis but also a cultural and community one, putting at risk the craftsmanship that makes churches such distinctive national treasures and the spiritual home that so many rely on.

However, the Survey makes clear that churches are not standing by idly. Across the country, volunteers are fundraising tirelessly, often shouldering the overwhelming responsibility of repairing their roofs from within local means. In many cases, small-scale fixes keep buildings usable, but the scale of need far outstrips local capacity. Without intervention, small leaks quickly escalate into structural crises costing many times more to resolve. This is why investment in roofs delivers extraordinary social return, as safeguarding the buildings in this way protects not just heritage but every community service that relies on these spaces.

Photo: Steve Drysdale, Giant Web Design

Current condition of church building and surrounding areas (2010 and 2025)



Weathering the storms

Beyond roofs, the Survey points to a gradual deterioration of church buildings across all categories. 32% of external walls now require repair (up from 23% in 2010) while 37% of windows need attention. Heating, plumbing and rainwater goods (gutters and drainpipes) are similarly vulnerable, over 40% report problems with rainwater disposal, and over a third (34%) with heating systems.

As climate change is threatening heavier rainfall and more frequent storms, churches face having to anticipate weather extremes that accelerate wear and tear on their buildings. This trend aligns with reports from Historic England which have flagged climate resilience as one of the most important issues affecting church buildings.[4] By far the best thing a church can choose is to ensure its buildings are both windproof and watertight, from which many other steps can be taken.

The burden of resilience

Despite these challenges, many churches are far from passive. An encouraging 38% of churches report improvements in their building condition over the past five years, often achieved through targeted grants or the sheer determination of volunteers willing to take on daunting tasks. These successes demonstrate that when support is available, churches can not only stabilise but actively improve their buildings.

At the same time, 22% of churches say their building has worsened over the last five years, rising to 25% among listed churches where conservation work is more complex, more expensive, and often dependent on scarce specialist skills. Rural churches, with fewer volunteers and smaller congregations, are particularly vulnerable. What emerges is a picture of extraordinary resilience of both buildings and the people who care for them.

[4] Historic England, *Responding to Climate Change* https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/places-of-worship/places-of-worship-at-risk/climate-change/

The roof was already failing – and then a storm hit

St Grada and Holy Cross is a Grade I listed remote rural church in the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall. It can be seen for miles around and attracts thousands of visitors through its beauty and history.

But urgent roof and tower repairs are desperately needed and which are estimated to cost around £450,000. Water often floods into the building during periods of heavy rainfall and plants are growing in between the stones and gaps in the walls. Many community groups want to use the building – but only when it is safe and dry enough to do so.

The church has applied for many grants and has found innovative ways to fundraise, including hosting an annual sea shanty concert. But there is still a shortfall, made worse by changes to the Listed Places of Worship Grants Scheme.

Winter storms can be dangerous for old buildings and last winter proved to be the case for St Grada and Holy Cross. Tiles were blown off and the church was left with a hole in the roof. Areas of the church were forced to be closed off for safety reasons.

“We have got to save the church. It has stood here for hundreds and hundreds of years. It is not going to fall on our watch,” says Wendy Elliott, long-time supporter of the church.

St Grada & Holy Cross
Grade, Cornwall

Photo: Steve Drysdale, Giant Web Design

Sudden changes make big financial headache for volunteers

St Mary the Virgin
Totnes, Devon

Part of the Totnes landscape for more than 500 years, Grade I listed St Mary the Virgin is open from dawn until dusk every day and attracts 50,000 visitors a year, from people wanting to enjoy its heritage, watch a concert or just find somewhere quiet to reflect and pray.

It is on Historic England’s Heritage At Risk Register – listed as “poor” and facing “slow decay”. Through extensive local fundraising and grants from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, the National Churches Trust and many others, the church had secured £1.44 million to pay for urgent repairs and a facilities upgrade. But a cap of £25,000 was imposed on the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme and the church was left with a shortfall of £130,000 VAT costs they would now have to find.

“This was a big knock for us. The project has been over 15 years in the planning and has already been through major restructuring,” explains Father Jim Barlow, Rector at St Mary.

“Given that we have already been supported by nearly all the major funders for church heritage projects, it has been a real struggle to find these extra funds. This is really disheartening for those who have worked so hard and for the local community. The extra funds we have raised could have been used to do more works on the building to help take it off the At Risk Register, so for the sake of VAT a significant investment in the local heritage fabric has been reduced.”

Church repairs are often planned over many years, partly because of the need to fundraise locally to pay for the costs. Consistency is key, so that churches can plan for the future, and keep their buildings in good repair.

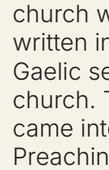
Photo: St Mary the Virgin

The hidden costs of repairs

Martin’s Memorial Church in Stornoway is on the Isle of Lewis – one of the islands that make up the Outer Hebrides off the north west coast of Scotland.

This B listed church is unique in the Church of Scotland; it is the only church which has it specifically written into its constitution that no Gaelic services are permitted in the church. This was because the church came into existence as an English Preaching Station in 1875 when most of the services in Stornoway were conducted in Gaelic. Rev Donald John Martin, the first minister, had the vision of providing more English services to minister to the growing number of English–speaking people who came to Stornoway for the fishing industry. Martin’s Memorial is named after him.

In 2014, the church made big changes to move from being a ‘one day a week service only church’ to one that was open and available to support the community every single day. This meant financial investment by the church, as they employed two people to make this vision possible. The church hasn’t stopped: they now employ 17 people and provide wide-reaching support in three areas: youth and schools, alcohol and drug support, and family support.



Martin’s Memorial Church
Stornoway, Isle of Lewis

This has meant making big changes to its dilapidated hall, which is directly connected to the church, to turn it into a dedicated family centre called ‘The Barn’. The £1 million project will provide the local community with additional support and activities for children and young people – support that is still sorely needed in the area.

Being located off the mainland can at times provide additional challenges for many places of worship: building materials often must be shipped in, and labourers, craftspeople and conservation architects may charge extra to cover their own travel and expenses. This can all increase any repair or refurbishment costs significantly.

“Our church was also so behind this work that they gave financially and sacrificially in recent years,” says Rev Tommy MacNeil. “This, along with significant support from the General Trustees of The Church of Scotland and other funders, means that ‘The Barn’ is opening its doors with the full cost of the project already being met.”

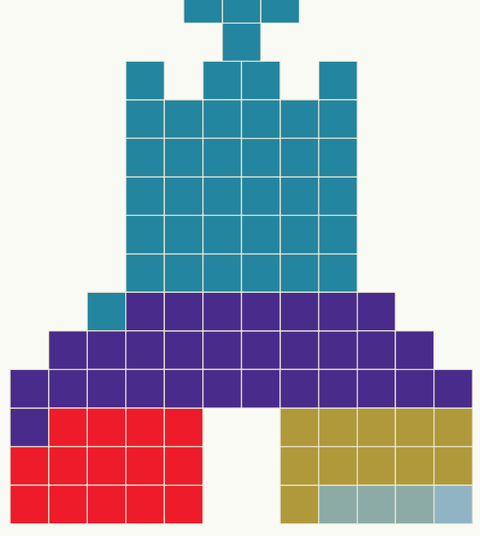
Photo: Tommy MacNeil

Inspections as acts of care

Regular condition inspections are one of the most effective safeguards to ensure a building remains in good repair. However, 70% of listed buildings have been inspected since 2021, compared to only 43% of unlisted ones. This reflects the regulatory framework around stewardship and also underlines the gap in routine checks for thousands of smaller churches. Where inspections lapse, problems are more likely to be discovered too late, leading to much higher repair costs. Worryingly, only 11% of churches in 2025 say they follow a formal maintenance schedule, down from around 13% in 2010.

For many others, building maintenance remains reactive or infrequent. If every church were supported to develop and maintain a regular inspection regime, countless small issues could be resolved early, preventing major damage and reducing financial strain. In the long run, investing in inspections is one of the most cost-effective ways of safeguarding both a historic building and the vibrant community life that depends upon it.

How frequently would you say that normal maintenance (i.e. not major works) has been carried out on your church buildings over the past 10 years?



- 40% **Regular maintenance as applicable to each task** (e.g. monthly lighting checks and annual boiler servicing)
- 30% **Maintenance generally annually with more frequent work done as and when needed**
- 14% **Maintenance carried out infrequently**
- 11% **Regular maintenance to formal maintenace schedule agreed with qualified professional**
- 3% **Too difficult to say/ don’t know**
- 1% **Not applicable**

Union Chapel
Islington, Greater London

From facing demolition to becoming a vibrant music venue

Union Chapel in Islington was built between 1875 and 1877 by the nonconformist architect James Cubitt. Often described as a small cathedral, with original seating for more than 1,700, Union Chapel fell into neglect and was at high risk of demolition. Its survival is due entirely to the determination of local people who rallied to save and restore it.

Today, Union Chapel has been transformed into a vibrant hub of activity – not only an active place of worship but also an award-winning cultural venue hosting world class artists such as Amy Winehouse and Adele, and home to the chapel's acclaimed homelessness charity, The Margins Project.

The chapel opens its doors as widely as possible, welcoming thousands each year, not only continuing as a place of worship but also for gigs, events, volunteering opportunities, and frontline services for people in crisis – all possible thanks to a continuous programme of conservation and maintenance of the Grade I listed buildings, assisted by grant funding organisations, generous donations and hiring out spaces. It's managed by a secular charity, showing the combination of secular and faith can be achieved for buildings of heritage.

Most recently, the chapel was awarded £1 million from The National Lottery Heritage Fund for its Sunday School Stories project. This combines much needed repairs to the Grade II listed Sunday School and the Grade I listed Gothic Revival chapel with a major programme of cultural engagement: celebrating 30 years as a music venue and charity, telling over 200 years of Nonconformist history, and exploring the chapel's proud record of social justice and activism.

Union Chapel stands today as living proof of how heritage buildings can be reimagined for the future – places that are beautiful, useful, and transformative.

Photo: James Bridle

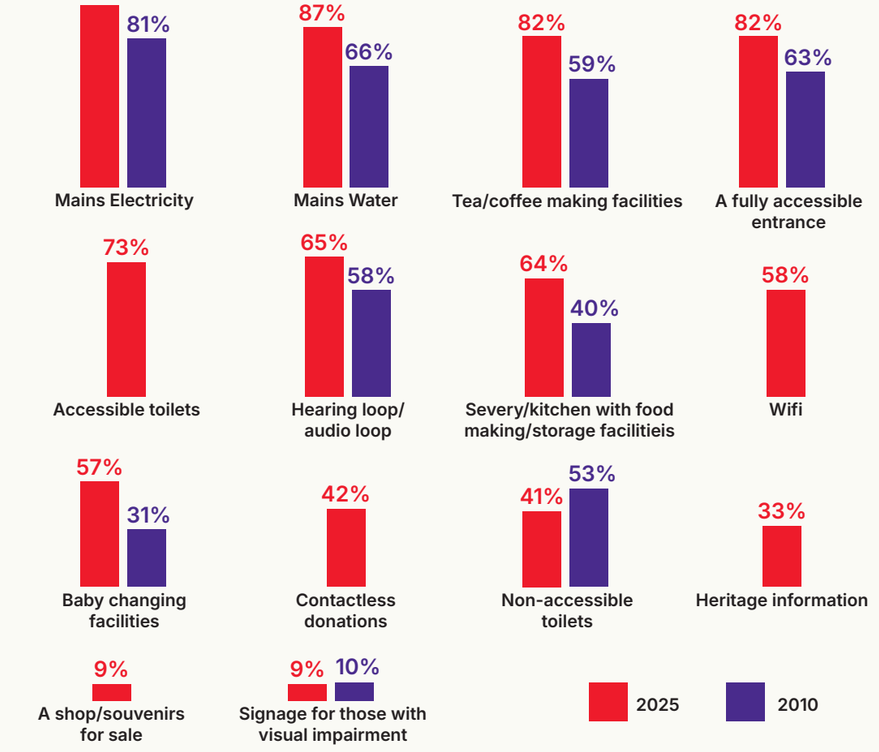
2.2 Facilities: fit for today's communities

Since 2010, thousands of churches have taken significant steps to improve accessibility and usability. What emerges from the National Churches Survey is how in the last 15 years, churches have been working hard to make their spaces practical as well as spiritual, and open to as many as possible. Running water, modern heating, accssible toilets, and safe kitchens are not luxuries, but the minimum expected by people who use these places for worship, community meals, youth groups, or local events. In recent years, the addition of Wifi has transformed how some churches open their doors, allowing them to connect with younger generations, host hybrid events, and support everything from language workshops to online learning.

Progress has often depended on the dedication of volunteers and the availability of funds. But these changes are not just compliance measures, they are about keeping buildings welcoming and relevant for the communities that use them.

The bar chart below compares 2010 to 2025 responses to questions about church facilities.

Facilities available at churches (2025 and 2010)



2.2A Everyday essentials

Everyday facilities are now significantly more widespread than in 2010. While the National Churches Survey shows there is near-universal access to mains electricity (99%), there are gaps between rural and urban churches in the overall provision of everyday essentials, with only 76% of rural churches being supplied by mains water compared to 99% in urban areas and 98% in suburban areas.

Hospitality remains a defining feature of churches around the country. 82% of churches have tea–making facilities and almost two thirds (64%) have a kitchen or servery, though again rural churches report lower provision (46%) compared to urban ones (85%) and suburban churches (79%). These kitchens are not just for after-service refreshments – they make possible community meals, toddler groups, managing foodbank distribution, and countless other gatherings where people find companionship and support. Also, baby changing facilities are now present in nearly six in ten (57%) churches, making them more welcoming for families.

Some churches have gone further, adding shops (9%) and heritage information points (33%). While these figures remain relatively low, they reveal an entrepreneurial spirit and a desire to keep buildings relevant – and a possible future direction for others to follow.

Photo: Karen Hind

Running water revolutionises how Welsh church can support its community

No longer will visitors at St Mary the Virgin church in Risca, Monmouthshire, have to be escorted across a busy road and up a steep path some 70 metres away to a neighbouring hall to use the toilets. After 171 years the Grade II* listed church got running water for the first time.

St Mary's fundraised and submitted grant applications to pay for an accessible toilet and a kitchen servery area to be installed at the church.

The team at St Mary are ready and excited for the community to use the space more; these changes will enable refreshments to be served as part of meetings and groups and ensure that the building is welcoming to everyone.

"St Mary's, built in 1853, is the latest in a long line of churches that has occupied this site since the 13th century and settlements going back to Roman times," says Janet Jones, Churchwarden at St Mary's.

"These churches have seen the growth of Risca from a small valley rural community, through the Industrial Revolution to the urban residential town of today. Providing these new facilities will massively improve our ability to reach out into our local community and hopefully offer better support."

St Mary the Virgin
Risca, Monmouthshire

The past fifteen years have seen a quiet transformation in how churches connect. Digital infrastructure was not measured in 2010, but in this Survey almost six in ten churches (58%) report having Wifi. Of these, two–thirds of urban churches (83%) and 73% of suburban ones are connected. In cities and towns, Wifi is now almost as important as heating or lighting, enabling livestreamed services, hybrid worship, online bookings and digital giving. In rural areas however, only 37% say they have Wifi, and this lack of connectivity risks making churches feel less accessible.

Digital access is not just about worship, but about sustainability and inclusion. More than four in ten churches (42%) now accept contactless donations, and many use Wifi to support online ticketing, concerts, cafés or community markets. Connectivity also strengthens secular use: groups can run presentations, courses and film nights; choirs and youth clubs can share events online; local charities can base activities in well-connected spaces. Reliable internet allows churches to serve as both heritage landmarks and modern hubs, bridging the needs of today's communities with the stories of the past, and making them indispensable to civic as well as spiritual life.

Photo: Gareth Simpson

2.2B Opening doors: accessibility as hospitality

Accessibility remains one of the most significant areas of progress. As of 2025, 82% of churches reported step-free entrances and 73% have accessible toilets, bringing them closer in line with access expectations for public buildings. Hearing loops are now present in nearly two-thirds (65%) of churches, ensuring that worship and events remain open to those with hearing impairments. Yet some gaps remain – only 9% of churches say they have invested in clear visual signage for those with visual impairments, and in rural areas this falls to just 4%, despite an ageing population that may rely more on visual aids.

This progress is important in the wider social context. Approximately one in four people in the UK are classified as disabled, amounting to 16.8 million individuals.[5] Public buildings that fail to provide step-free access, accessible toilets, or disability technology exclude a significant proportion of the population from community life. Churches, by contrast, have demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusion, often achieving accessibility upgrades through local fundraising and volunteer efforts, even in places where statutory obligations do not apply.

Accessibility is not just a matter of compliance – it is an expression of the church's core mission of welcome. Investment in ramps, toilets, and hearing loops ensures that churches remain open to all, regardless of age or ability. In many cases, these works have also enabled them to respond to local community needs, from hosting baby groups to dementia cafés. By making accessibility a priority, churches are opening their doors wider, seeking everyone in society to have the same opportunities to experience what they offer.

[5] Gov UK Department for Work and Pensions, *Family Resources Survey 2022-2023* https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2022-to-2023

Grange Methodist Church
Grange-over-Sands, Cumbria

Financial challenges in making a church accessible for all

The team at Grange Methodist Church in Cumbria understands their local community and are working hard to ensure their building meets the needs of its users. But it is not without huge challenges.

Grange Methodist Church is located in the middle of the town. The Grade II listed building is the second oldest church in Grange, built in 1874 on a green field, which is now the main shopping street in the town.

The team at Grange Methodist Church have been fundraising for years to be able to make the church building more accessible. The changes have wide–spread support from the community and from their local MP. But once they reached their target, sadly they found that two years of inflation and spiralling costs of building materials meant that project costs had doubled.

"We believe equality is important, but at the moment that's not the message our building gives," explains Revd Jo Rand, Minister at Grange Methodist Church.

"This project means everyone will be able to come in through the same welcoming entrance, rather than having step-free access hidden away round the back by the bins, and the toilets will be easy to find, and have hot water for hand washing, and heating!

"The church hall has always been well used, but this project makes more of our building available for all sorts of uses through the week. Relocating the kitchen means that hospitality can be at the heart of what goes on at Grange Methodist Church... We're so excited to be able to look ahead to the warm welcome we'll be able to offer to all sorts of community groups, rather than having to apologise for the state of our facilities."

The team at Grange is not giving up despite ongoing financial difficulty – they believe in this project and are committed in making the church a welcoming space for everyone.

Photo: Paul Rand

2.3 Costs associated: investing together for the future

Churches are not neglectful of their duty of care but are going above and beyond. They are remarkable in their determination to sustain their buildings – but the financial challenge is enormous. Over the last three years, the National Churches Survey shows that 65% of churches have met between 75 to 100% of their annual repair costs all from their own funds. This shows communities are not waiting for someone else to step in but working tirelessly to preserve their buildings. Yet rural and listed churches, already managing small congregations and high repair needs, are less able to meet the full cost of major works without external assistance.

Funding sources – burden of resilience

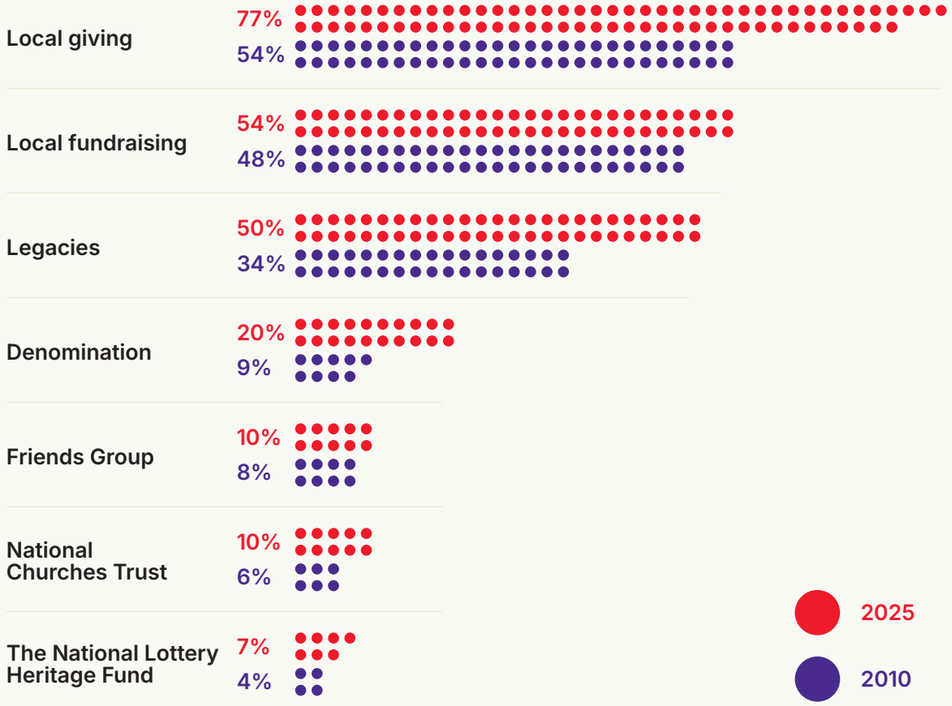
This Survey shows that although churches are having to become more active and creative in drawing on a wide range of funding streams, the reliance on local people has deepened over the last 15 years. Local giving (from congregants and visitors) has risen sharply, from 54% in 2010 to 77% of churches in 2025 reporting they rely on these donations.

Alongside this, legacies have risen as a funding source from 34% in 2010 to 50% in 2025, whereas local fundraising (from concerts and events to jumble sales) has remained a steady income source over the years at around 50%. 31% of churches are relying on their reserves. Even denominational support has more than doubled, from only 9% in 2010 up to 20% in 2025, showing that church institutions are becoming more aware of systematic support required.

Both the 2010 and 2025 Surveys underline that churches are not passive, nor neglectful. These are remarkable figures that speak to the strength of local attachment to church buildings. They also highlight the risk that if these buildings are lost, it is not because local people failed to see their value, but because they could not sustain church buildings alone and need external support. In fact, the National Churches Survey shows churches doing more than ever – fundraising, applying for grants, using reserves, and seeking business donations. The consistent deterioration in building condition is not because of a lack of local effort, but rather because financial challenges are overtaking the wider availability of support.

Sources of funding for repairs and upkeep of building(s)

Sources of funding for repairs and upkeep of building(s) (2025 and 2010)



The resilience of church buildings should not be mistaken for abundance. It is a reflection of the extraordinary effort local people devote to giving, fundraising and volunteering their time. In many cases, this spirit of stewardship has kept churches open against the odds. But as buildings age and costs rise the question is not whether churches care for their buildings – they clearly do – but how long they can realistically continue to carry the weight alone.

Applying for a grant from a church's perspective

By Dr Phil Simpson, Session Clerk Killin & Ardeonaig Parish Church, Perthshire

Our church building, the only church for many miles, has to be kept open and maintained to modern day standards. Conservation, standard repairs and improvements to the building are essential and depend on a huge amount of work that may or may not bring in a grant.

The time to do this is squeezed from the volunteers who are already carrying the larger part of service delivery; it is they who are closer to the vision of the church being a beacon in the community.

The next part of our fundraising programme is to raise £250,000 to restore our windows. To achieve this will take many hours of identifying and applying to a lot of grantmaking charitable trusts – and not always successfully.

Volunteers giving their own time and money are the backbone of our church and seeking grants is essential: the sums involved are otherwise too big for a small though vibrant congregation.

In the meantime, volunteers' routine service is left with things postponed. We often think that if the fundraising effort could be channelled into the core purposes of what we do the impact would be huge.

Killin & Ardeonaig Parish Church
Killin, Perthshire

Photos: Ron Allner

3 Protected for today: sustainable for tomorrow

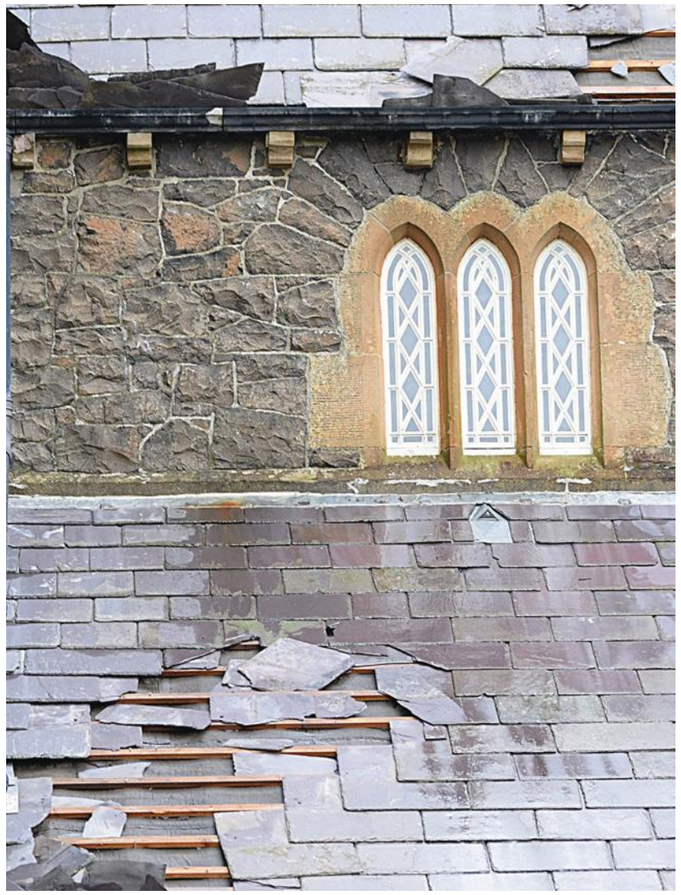


Photo: Nina McNeary

3.1 Church buildings and the challenge of climate change

Churches are not standing still when it comes to meeting the huge challenges posed by a changing climate. Many are making changes to their buildings to make them windtight and waterproof; it is easier to heat a dry church than a damp one. But they are also taking steps to reduce their buildings' carbon footprint and make them more environmentally sustainable, which may be underpinned by their theological conviction for caring for both people and wider environment.

When asked "What actions have you taken to improve the environmental sustainability of your church and its buildings?", churches revealed a picture of widespread, practical action. Many of these upgrades could be driven by the sharp rise in energy prices in 2021-22, which forced many churches to act quickly.[6]

Encouragingly, this marks a clear shift in emphasis from earlier surveys. In 2010, 36% of churches reported making heating improvements, though these were framed as part of general maintenance and building care, rather than environmental sustainability. But by 2025, the figure has risen to 41%, with actions taken such as replacing old boilers, upgrading thermostats, zoning heating, or adding insulation.

These measures are explicitly recognised as a response to recent years: what was once seen simply as upkeep is now understood as central to protecting heritage, reducing running costs, and contributing to wider environmental goals.

A promising sign is the uptake of audits. 28% percent of churches have carried out an energy survey or audit, some supported by denominational schemes such as the Church of England's 'Energy Footprint Tool' and the Parish Buying network. These audits are critical for mapping long-term pathways to net zero and churches that have undertaken audits may be more likely to also apply for grants or plan phased investments.

When asked what would be most useful to churches in terms of "enabling greater environmental sustainability for your church buildings", financial support topped the list, with 70% saying it would be "very useful." Beyond funding, 56% pointed to the need for professional expertise, recognising that many environmental upgrades require specialist advice.

[6] Office for National Statistics, *The impact of higher energy costs on UK businesses 2021 to 2024* https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/impact-of-higher-energy-costs-on-uk-businesses

The real costs of adapting to the climate crisis

By The Revd Canon Dr Stephen Evans, Rector of St Marylebone

When the fourth iteration of St Marylebone Parish Church in central London was built in 1810, the roof, gutters and downpipes were designed to clear around two tonnes of water per hour. This was, then, more than enough to withstand even the heaviest of downpours.

Today, these downpours can deliver almost four tonnes of rain in an hour, and projected rainfall might well increase this to as much as eight or even ten tonnes per hour over the next two hundred years.

The roof at St Marylebone could no longer cope with the heaviest rainfall. The fact that the sheet aluminium roof cladding was, in some areas, no longer attached to the roof's structure coupled with the all too obvious fact that the roof was directing water into the building rather than away from it, meant that urgent action had to be taken.

The decision was made to replace the roof with Welsh slate, from the same quarry used in 1810. Modest but extremely effective modifications were made to parts of the roof and all rainwater goods – gutters and downpipes –were redesigned and reengineered to ship up to ten tonnes of water an hour.

Making these necessary changes came at a huge cost and other key projects were put on hold or cancelled. The new roof cost more than £3 million, which included upgrading its insulation to international Passivhaus standards, helping to halve our use of fossil fuels.

The work wouldn't have been possible without substantial grants, including from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Culture Recovery Fund and Neighbourhood CIL. Recovering the full amount of VAT costs through the Listed Places of Worship Grants Scheme proved vital.

St Marylebone
Marylebone,
Greater London

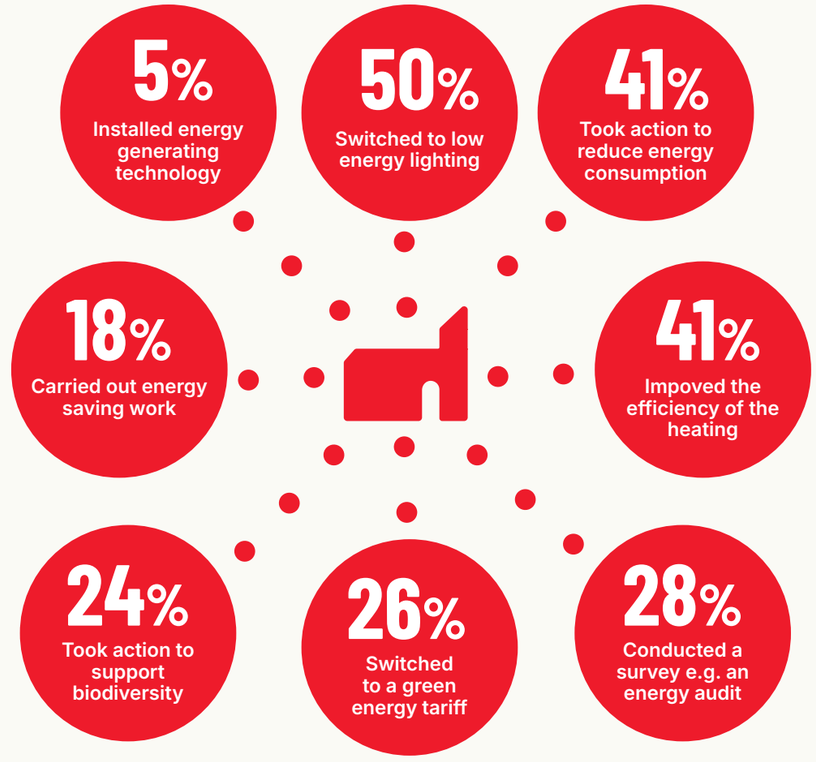
Photo: Rev Canon Dr Stephen Evans

Ready for the future – but where does that leave other church buildings?

St Marylebone Parish Church – which is also home to a 12,000 patient GP practice, also runs a bursary-aided psychotherapy service and hosts a large number of concerts, art exhibitions, and community events – it now has a building that can cope with the changing climate for centuries to come.

St Marylebone has been in the fortunate position of being able to raise the substantial funds needed to address both present and longer–term climate change problems, but where is the money to come from that will pay for the expensive modifications needed to address the changes in climate which will affect historic church buildings across the UK?

Actions taken to improve the environmental sustainability of church buildings



4 What holds churches back and what helps them to thrive

Photo: Ellie Grana

4.1 Barriers to growth and resilience

The National Churches Survey shows that churches are not short of vision. Asked what prevents them from doing more for their communities, churches pointed to obstacles in resources and infrastructure. Some barriers, like finance and volunteers, could be strengthened with the right support, while others, like facilities, space, and parking, require sustained investment and are harder to put in place. Together, they explain why willing churches can often find their ambitions held back.

Volunteers

In 2010, 33% of churches said that “lack of volunteer time” limited their ability to provide more community activities. By 2025, when asked directly about limitations to doing more, almost half (45%) pointed to lack of volunteer time as a major barrier. In a separate question, when asked what would help churches do more, 70% said that ‘more volunteers’ would be the single most helpful form of practical support. Though the wording and framing have shifted in the Surveys, a trend can be seen here, as what was once a background worry has become one of the single greatest obstacles to growth, showing that the volunteer backbone of church life is a vital resource.

Financial limitations

Nearly a third (30%) of churches say financial limitations prevent them from doing more, compared with 24% in the 2010 Survey. Congregations and local people remain the bedrock of philanthropic support for churches: 77% of churches rely on local giving, 54% on local fundraising events, and 50% on gifts in wills. Yet nearly a third (31%) are now drawing on church reserves to cover basic costs, a cycle that cannot last indefinitely.

The Survey also highlights clear ways forward, as churches most often identify more financial support (62%) as the key to unlocking their capacity to serve their communities. However, those with strong finances and skilled volunteers are more likely to access external grants, while smaller churches with fewer resources risk being left behind.

Space and facilities

Lack of suitable space remains one of the most common barriers. In 2025, 24% of churches reported that space constraints limit their ability to do more. The problem is sharpest where no hall is available – 41% of churches without a hall cited 'lack of space' as a limitation, compared with just 11% of those with one.

Parking and facilities increase the challenge. In 2010, 21% of churches identified insufficient parking as a constraint. By 2025 this has worsened to 37% overall, with the highest levels reported in urban areas (45%) and rural ones (36%), with suburban areas at 32%. Accessibility is also a concern: 29% of churches cite lack of disabled parking as a limitation to wider community use, underlining how physical access issues extend beyond the building itself. For many communities, particularly rural ones, a church without parking or suitable facilities is a church that simply cannot expand.

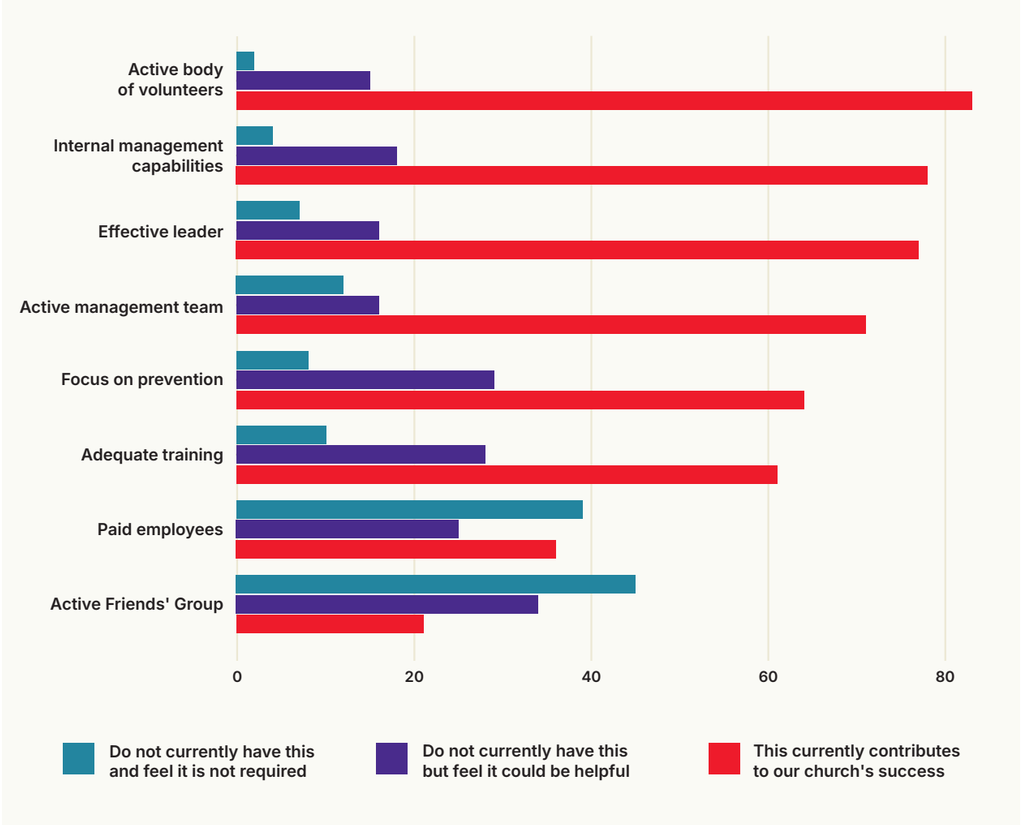
Limitations to holding more community activities in church buildings

4.2 Recipes for success

The Survey also asked churches what could contribute to the successful management of individual church buildings, and beyond volunteers (83%), churches point to strong internal management capabilities (78%), effective leadership (77%), and active management teams (71%) as vital foundations.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) said focusing on prevention of issues contributes to success, while 61% pointed to adequate training. Paid employees (36%) and active Friends' groups (21%) already make a difference where they exist, and many others see their potential. Taken together, this feedback shows that churches are not only aware of their barriers but already know what works – and where further investment could unlock even greater resilience.

What factors do, or would, contribute to the successful management of your church buildings?

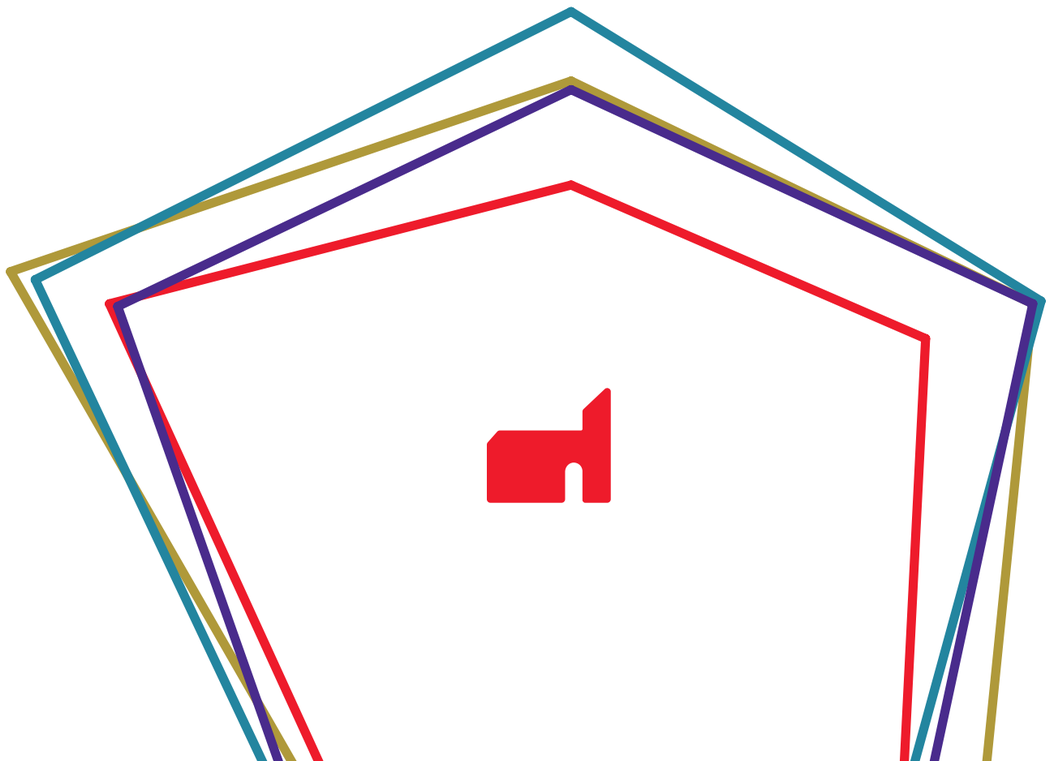


4.3 Web of church resilience

There are many factors which contribute to the ongoing resilience and sustainability of churches. These factors include but are not limited to finances, volunteer strength, engagement with the community, condition of the building and the facilities and accessibility on offer. All these come together to enable churches to serve their communities as places of worship, community hubs, visitor destinations and more. Many churches have been places of continual use over centuries. But it is the aforementioned factors which ensure a church building can be used in these ways for years to come.

Charting these factors together therefore gives us a sense of the sustainability of a church building and its congregation. None of these factors is uniquely able to make a church resilient for the future, neither should a shortcoming in one area be seen as a threat to a church's survival. If church history tells us anything, it is that churches are remarkably resilient despite numerous varied and complex challenges.

The five main factors, however, can give a good indication of where churches stand. When these five strands are aligned, churches can be confident that their buildings, community work, and finances are in a strong position for future proofing the work of the church and securing the heritage of churches for generations to come.



To make this visible, we can map church resilience as a web, with the five factors radiating from the centre:

Facilities and Accessibility: a high score demonstrates the suitability of facilities for community engagement and religious activities, and incorporates factors such as accessible entrances, Wifi, and measures to make facilities environmentally friendly.

Community Use: a high score shows that buildings are open regularly and are used by other groups in the community as well as for other activities put on by the church for the community.

Volunteer Strength: a high score suggests that a church has sufficient volunteers to carry out the activities they want to carry out, and that volunteers play a significant part in the success of the church.

Building Condition: a high score demonstrates good care of the church building, regular maintenance, regular inspections, and improvement in the fabric.

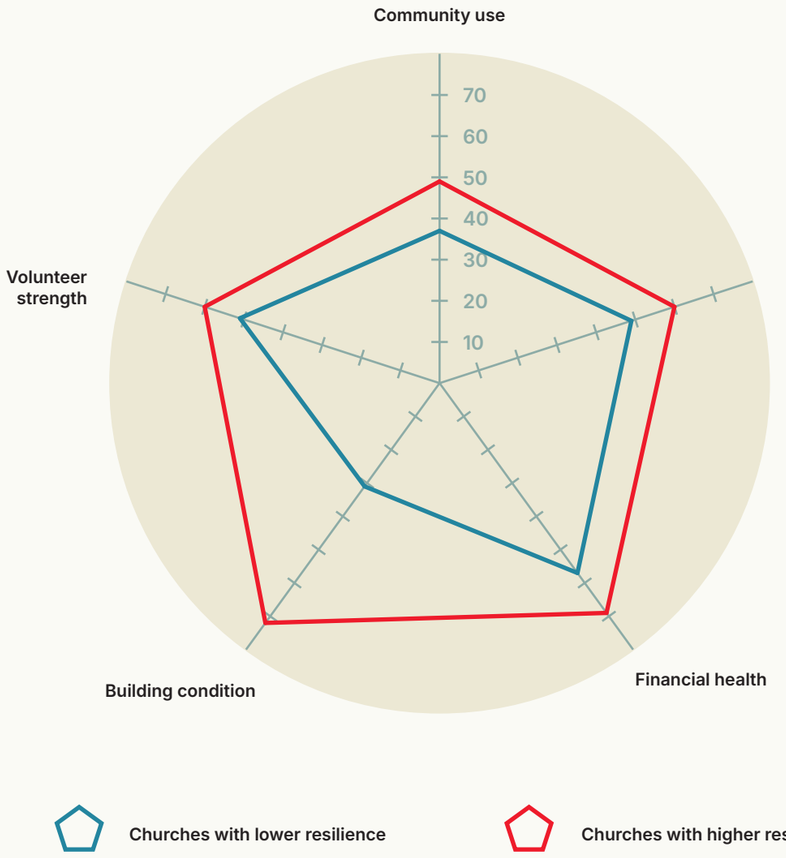
Financial Health: a high score shows that a church has the funds to cover repair costs, secure funding streams, and an optimistic outlook for the next five years.

Together, these strands form the Web of Church Resilience. When they stretch outward evenly, the picture is balanced and resilient. When one collapses inward, perhaps through weak finances, poor facilities, or a shortage of volunteers, the entire web is distorted, leaving the church vulnerable.

The Link Between Building Condition and Resilience

The chart below maps two different types of church: those which say their fabric has improved and those who say it has worsened. What becomes clear is that building condition is related to other resilience markers. Churches which report deteriorating fabric have a smaller web, in which community engagement lessens, finances take a hit, and facilities become less suitable. The link is clear even if we cannot say for sure which comes first – fabric, finances, community engagement or facility decline.

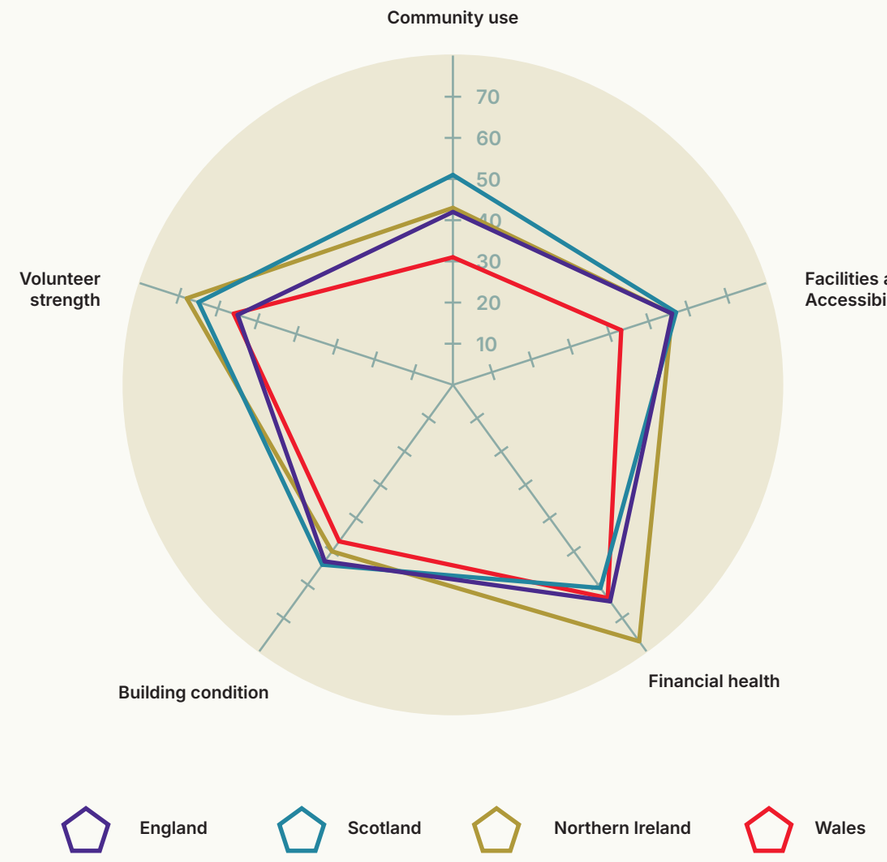
Church Resilience



Charting resilience by UK nation

When we chart each of the four nations on the web of church resilience what is clear is that each nation needs a targeted approach to help church buildings and their congregations to thrive.

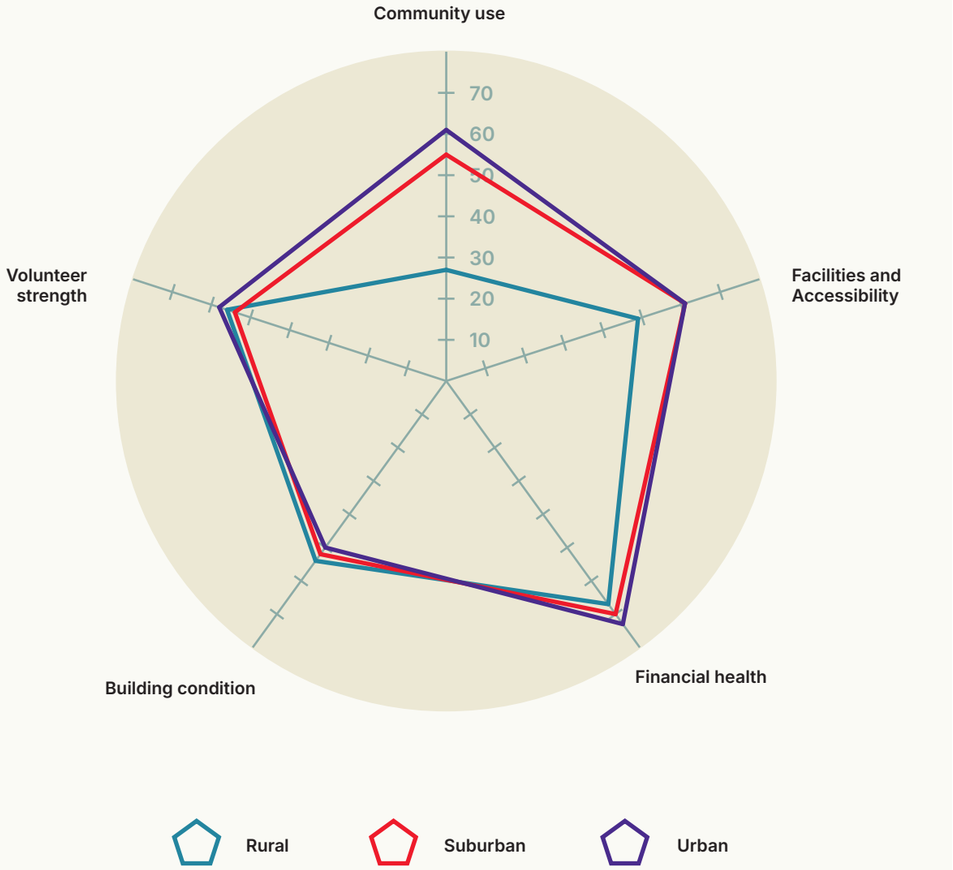
Church Resilience – UK Nation



Charting resilience by rurality

Rural churches face a challenge surrounding finances and community engagement. They lack the financial resources to host community activities. Volunteer strength score remains similar to those among urban and suburban churches, but this is more likely because they are not hosting as many community activities, as opposed to having large numbers of volunteers.

Church Resilience – Rurality



What emerges is a clear picture. Resilient churches are not defined by size, wealth, or raw volunteer numbers, but by balance. They are open and welcoming, sustained by committed, if few, volunteers, underpinned by sustainable finances, and all cared for with regular maintenance. Where all five strands of the web are strong, churches can be hopeful for their future. Where any one strand is weakened, the whole structure bends. These spider graphs, grounded in the National Churches Survey, show what is possible when people, buildings, and resources are aligned.

5 Conclusion – a call to action

Churches remain among the most valued and resilient community assets in the United Kingdom. They are safety nets on an extraordinary scale, providing services that no other national network can deliver. They also hold within their walls some of the nation's greatest cultural treasures, from stained glass to memorials that anchor local stories within a shared national heritage.

Churches are also one of the best places to invest in the voluntary sector. They already harness extraordinary energy and goodwill, and with structured support they could grow this civic infrastructure even further – offering pathways for skills, leadership, and community support that benefit not just churches but wider society as a whole.

Yet the National Churches Survey is unambiguous in showing that this inheritance is on shaky ground. Volunteer time is stretched, finance remains a barrier, and too often communities are left fighting crises rather than focusing on the future. The Survey only captured the survivors and those with enough volunteer time to complete it. A substantial number report decline in their building condition, some uncertainty about the next five years, and fear that without help, the burden will become too heavy. Without greater support, even the most committed churches cannot carry the weight alone.

This is a key moment. The Survey shows that churches want to do more – to expand cultural programmes, deepen social care, and strengthen their environmental action. Investment in church buildings could help to transform communities throughout the UK, building on the work that they are already doing to support people and local infrastructure. But without intervention, the risks are high. If churches close, the impacts will be felt: a loss of heritage, a loss of social care, and a loss of spaces for worship and belonging. This would signal not only neglect of our cultural inheritance, but also a failure to care for communities at their most vulnerable.

A national response is needed, that matches the energy that churches have to keep their buildings open with real support. Denominations must strengthen their backing, heritage organisations must align their expertise and advocacy, and local authorities must play their part. Above all, the UK Government must step forward with a strategic and consistent framework of funding that is simple to access and available to every church, regardless of size or denomination.

The choice is clear. These buildings, and the communities they sustain, are part of our shared inheritance and our shared responsibility.

Now is the moment to act.

6 Acknowledgements

The National Churches Survey, created by the National Churches Trust, was made possible by the thousands of volunteers, staff and clergy who participated. Thank you for your time, care, and resolve in ensuring that your church's voice was heard.

We gratefully acknowledge the kind and generous support of Yeomans, Ecclesiastical Insurance, and the University of York which enabled the Survey to take place.

Steering Group

Trevor Cooper
Chair of the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance (acting in a personal capacity)

Professor Francis Davis
Department of Theology & Religion, University of Birmingham

Professor Kate Giles
Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture, University of York

Andrew Hawkins
CEO, Whitestone Insight

Dr Louise Hampson
Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, University of York

Eddie Tulasiewicz
National Churches Trust

Dr Nigel Walter
Director, Archangel Architects and Trustee of the National Churches Trust

Will Watt
Founder, State of Life

Project Team National Churches Trust

Dr Karl Newton
Project Lead

Oliver Lack
Project Lead

Rachael Adams
Sarah Crossland
Jon Hodges
David Lynch
Nina McNeary
Matthew Maries
Anne–Marie O'Hara
Gareth Simpson

Claire Walker
Chief Executive of the National Churches Trust

Sir Philip Rutnam
Chair of the National Churches Trust

All the staff and Trustees of the National Churches Trust

Sorcha Connell
Communications Consultant and Copywriter

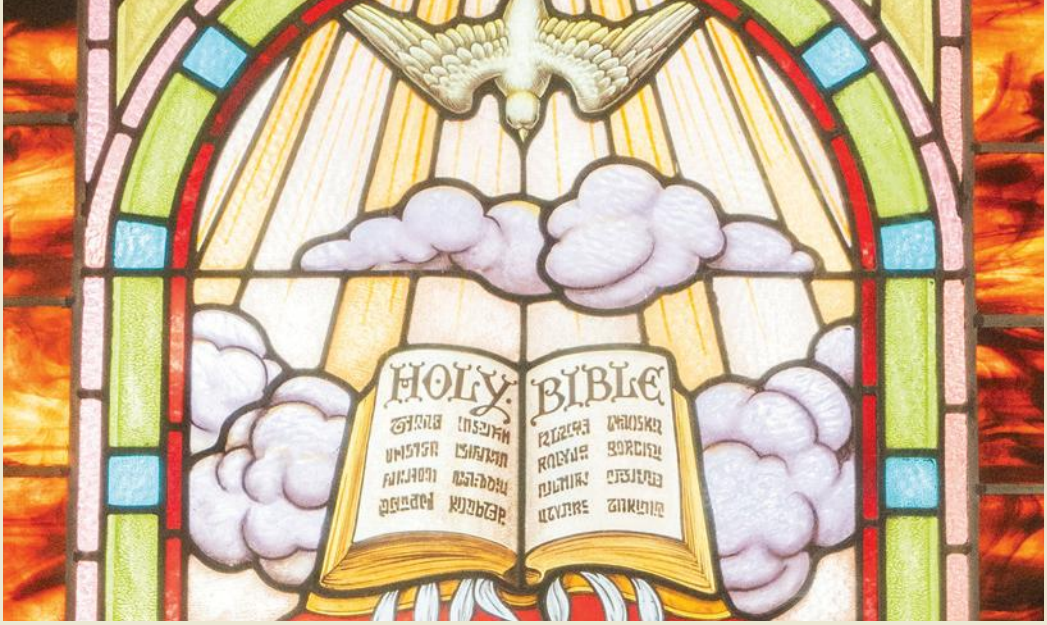
Lachlan Rurlander
Consultant, Whitestone Insight

Dr Peter Brierley
Brierley Consulting

Extra support provided by Jack Edwards at the Diocese of London to the environmental questions, and by **Charlotte Walshe** for her delivery of the 2010 Survey.

Thank you to everyone who supported the National Churches Survey to ensure that a variety of voices from different denominations across the UK could give their church a voice. We are particularly grateful to those who sent in messages of support which can be found at: nationalchurchestrust.org/survey

Responsibility for the final report rests with the National Churches Trust



Churches, chapels and meeting houses aren't just places of worship. They're the heart of our communities, the glue that binds people together. Filled with food banks, parent and toddler groups, mental health services and warm spaces, churches everywhere serve local people and boost the wellbeing of our nation.

But churches are at risk. Many are falling into disrepair. And once the doors close, they rarely reopen. As a society we can't afford to lose churches. We need leaders like you to join with the National Churches Trust, to speak up for churches, preserve our precious heritage and help these vital community spaces survive.

We Speak Up
Church buildings are valued and supported

We Build Up
Churches are well maintained, adaptable and in good repair

We Open Up
Churches are sustainable, open and welcoming

To find out how you can help visit
nationalchurchestrust.org/survey

NATIONAL CHURCHES TRUST

Yours For Good

National Churches Trust
7 Tufton Street
London SW1P 3QB

020 7222 0605
info@nationalchurchestrust.org

Registered Charity No. 1119845
Company No. 06265201
VAT No.450748780

All material published in the National Churches Survey is the intellectual property of either the National Churches Trust or our authors and is protected by international copyright law. Images are the intellectual property of the relevant photographers unless otherwise stated. No attribution does not imply that the work is the copyright of the National Churches Trust.
Photo: Iona Said